



Religion After Pandemic

Lost means gone - it also means dislocated



Diana Butler Bass

Apr 26 26 21

During a [Freeing Jesus](#) event hosted by a Seattle church, a man asked: “What do you think is going to happen with churches after the pandemic? How is Christianity going to be changed by this?”

The question startled me. I was focused on my new book and not talking about the future of faith. I quickly pivoted back to Jesus. And the questioner just as quickly pivoted back to “What’s going to happen after the pandemic?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Nobody knows.”

Since the publication of [Christianity After Religion](#) in 2012, people have asked me more questions about church, faith, and the future than I can possibly remember. I’ve learned a thing or two about conversations regarding the future.

- 1) No one knows what the future holds, not even the most intuitive historian, skilled trend spotter, or well-trained futurist.
- 2) Time is an odd thing. We experience it (mostly) in terms of change and chronology. But in sacred perspective, time exists differently. Indeed, theologically there is no past, present, or future. God holds time without reference to what has been and what will be.

In other words, I’ve become more modest when speaking of the future of faith. Even though I am happy to engage these questions, I think a more fruitful course (at this moment) is to focus on *now*.

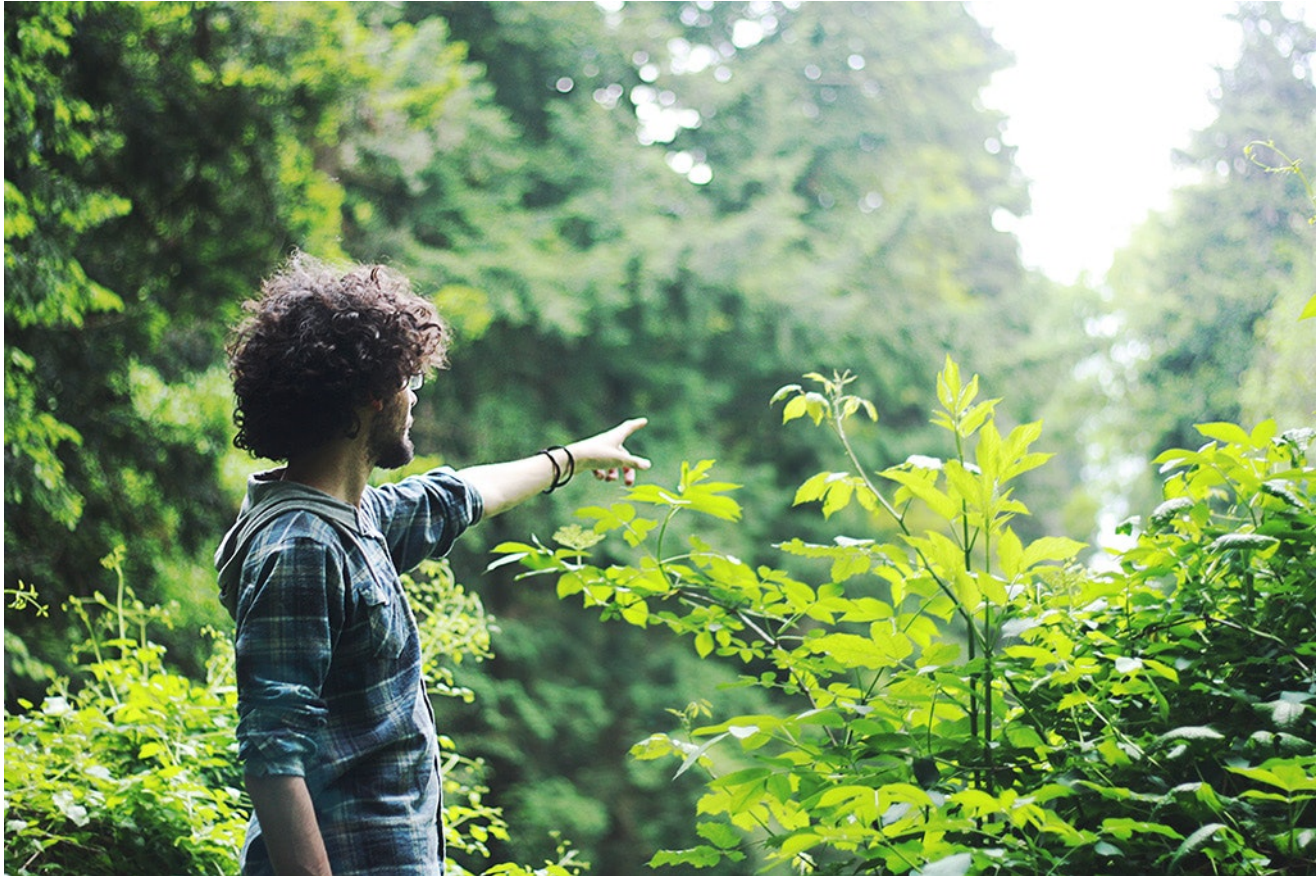
Truth is, we don’t even know where we are in the course of the pandemic. Perhaps the best way to understand this moment is that *we are nearing the end of the beginning*. Millions of Americans are vaccine-hesitant (or vaccine-denying), and billions of people around the planet are suffering from resurgent strains, lack of adequate medical intervention, and no vaccines. COVID isn’t through with us yet, even while here in the United States, we see a bit of light on the horizon.

Instead of navigating all those unknowns, it seems a wiser course to focus on what we do know. And what we know is what we’ve been through – and how we are continuing to struggle.

* * * * *

So, what have we been through?

It is quite striking how people use the word “lost” and “loss” to describe the last fourteen months: we’ve lost friends and relatives to death, we’ve lost a year of our lives, we’ve lost income, we’ve lost a sense of security, we’ve lost our ability to move freely through the world. We’ve lost a lot.



My clergy friends speak of grief and lament – perhaps the post-COVID church will be one marked by that sad journey. But I think that “grief and lament” lacks specificity. It is hard to grieve millions of people (even when necessary to do so), and it is hard to grieve the hundreds of millions of lost years of our lives (even when the sadness of that is weighty). We need to grieve what is gone, yes. But that is not the only task ahead.

Lost doesn’t just refer to what is *gone*. It also means that which is mislaid, out of place, dislocated. Sometimes lost just means that we’re lost. And that is the other task for the post-pandemic world: to help others find what has been lost, to point the way beyond the thicket. We need to find ourselves again; we need to be relocated in the world.

* * * * *

We’ve been dislocated in four major ways:

1) Temporal dislocation

We've lost our sense of time as it existed before the pandemic. How often have you thought: What day is this? What time is it? Did I miss an event? What month is it? That's temporal dislocation.

2) Historical dislocation

We've lost our sense of where we are in the larger story of both our own lives and our communal stories. History has been disrupted. Where are we? Where are we going? The growth of conspiracy theories, the intensity of social media, political and religious "deconstructions" – these are signs of a culture seeking a meaningful story to frame their lives because older stories have failed. That's historical dislocation.

3) Physical dislocation

We've lost our sense of embodiment with others and geographical location. For millions, technology has moved "physicality" into cyber-space and most of us have no idea what to do with this virtual sense of location. Without our familiar sense of being bodily in specific spaces, things like gardening, baking, sewing, and painting have emerged as ways of feeling the ground and the work of our hands. We've striven to maintain some sort of embodiment even amid isolation. But the disconnection between our bodies, places, and other bodies has been profound. That's physical dislocation.

4) Relational dislocation

We've lost our daily habits of interactions with other humans, the expression of emotions together in community. Have you worried you won't know how to respond when you can be with your friends without distance, with no masks? How it will feel to be in large groups again? How will work or school feel back in person, with others at the next desk or waiting on customers face-to-face, or in the first in-person meeting? What happens when the plexiglass comes down, the mask is off? That's relational dislocation.

With these dislocations in mind, the task comes into focus. Surely, religious communities need to be about the work of *relocation* – finding what has been lost, repairing what has been broken, and re-grounding people into their own lives and communities.

* * * * *

The word *religion* is believed to have come from the Latin, *religare*, meaning to "bind" or "reconnect." *Religare* is about mending what has been broken, recovering what has been mislaid, and reconnecting that which is frayed.

What is the future of religion post-pandemic? Well, it depends. It depends if we continue to insist on the *other* definition of religion – as obligation to a particular order of things (like doctrine, polity, or moral action – a "bounden duty"). If nothing else, the pandemic has revealed that particular orders of things can be upset, overturned by the most unanticipated of things.

If *religion* is about maintaining a certain order of liturgy, dogma, or practice, well, then, we can consider religion one more pandemic loss.

If we think of *religion* in terms of *religare*, however, the task of the post-pandemic church – the work of finding, repairing, and relocating – is clear. We must reconnect ourselves and others with time, history, physicality, and relationships. In this sense, the future of religion has never been brighter – our lost world needs finding. Pandemic dislocation calls for guides and weavers of wisdom. We don't need to return to the old ways, we need to be relocated. We need to find a new place, a new home in a disrupted world.

And at the very heart of finding our lost selves is relocating our hearts in and with God. There is a journey beyond the pandemic, and we will find the way a step at a time. We haven't been to this particular future before. And we will need one another to get there.

Questions for discussion in comments:

- 1) With the rapid increase of the religiously “unaffiliated” and those leaving congregations, do you often think about the future of your religious tradition? Especially when it comes to your children or grandchildren?
- 2) Have you considered the double meaning of the words “lost” and “loss” and how that double meaning relates to your own life?
- 3) What do you think about the four dislocations? Which have you felt most strongly?
- 4) Did you know there is a scholarly argument over the origin of the word “religion”? Does it surprise you that there's tension over whether religion means “reconnection” or “order”? Do you lean more toward one definition or the other?
- 5) What in your life needs to be relocated post-pandemic? How can you help relocate others? What might your faith community or spiritual gathering or friend group do to help relocate others? How can you be a guide or weaver in a post-pandemic world?

[Subscribe](#)

INSPIRATION

*Start walking, start walking towards Shams,
Your legs will get heavy and tired.
Then comes the moment of feeling the wings you've grown lifting.*

— **Rumi** (Shams al-Din Mohammad, a Persian poet, was Rumi's mentor and guide)

*There will be
a resurrection of the wild.
Already it stands in wait
at the pasture fences.
It is rising up
in the waste places of the cities
When the fools of the capitals
have devoured each other
in righteousness,
and the machines have eaten
the rest of us, then
there will be a second coming
of the trees. They will come
straggling over the fences
slowly, but soon enough.*

— **Wendell Berry**

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

— **William Stafford**

Being misplaced, even by choice, is so very difficult on our body and soul. In my case, I still long for what, once, I took for granted— That immediacy of culture and belonging. And for those who did not choose — So many are forced to be misplaced in our world today! Some are misplaced even in the lands that they were born on, striped away by cultural warfare, greed and ignorance. I wish for us to know this void in each other— To witness it for one another so we would be able to imagine a new, WHOLE, body.

— Shahar Rabi

Subscribe

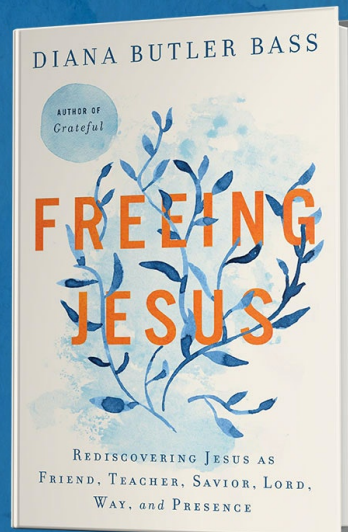
BOOK LAUNCH CORNER

I didn't assemble a conventional book launch team. Instead, I prefer the organic, old-fashioned approach — I hope all my friends and readers will spread the news of *Freeing Jesus* to their friends and associates! My dream for *Freeing Jesus* is that folks will have more confidence in sharing their own stories of Jesus — and that together we can speak easily of a loving and just Jesus in this aching, wounded world.

Please share pictures of, comments about, and quotes from *Freeing Jesus* on social media. After you read the book, post a review on Amazon, at Barnes and Noble, or on Goodreads (don't forget the little stars!). [Plan an in-person event](#) for your church or college for fall or winter. Consider *Freeing Jesus* for a book group. Buy a copy for a friend or for your local library. Share the links I post to interviews or book talks.

“With each new book, Diana Butler Bass goes more deeply into what it means to be a Christian now, in a moment when many can't summon the energy or the hope required. This may be her finest yet.”

—BILL MCKIBBEN
author *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation*



PROUDLY PUBLISHED BY
 HarperOne

Also, I don't know how many authors ask, but *I truly appreciate your prayers* for stamina (virtual book launches are harder than in-person ones), clarity, and wisdom as I do interviews, plan schedules, write talks and sermons, and as the publishing team reaches out to media to book events.

All of this makes a huge difference. We live in an “influencer” culture — but we sometimes forget that together we can influence the world!

PODCASTS:

Please listen to these great conversations and share.

THINGS NOT SEEN RADIO with David Dault.

This is a rich NPR-quality interview with one of America's most theologically astute hosts.

Please listen to *Rediscovering Jesus* [here](#).

THE SOUL OF THE NATION with Jim Wallis.

Jim and Diana talk about the Jesus of experience, the Bible and tradition, religious trauma and feminism, and what it means to be part of a “remnant community” in a post-religious time that acts for justice in the world. Please listen to the podcast [here](#).

EVENT:

You're invited!

[FREEING JESUS at Riverside Church in NYC](#) (virtual event)

Sunday, May 2 at 1:00 PM eastern time.

An introduction to *Freeing Jesus* with lots of interactive time for discussion! Presented by the Riverside Faith Formation Ministry. For more information and registration, click [here](#).

RECORDED LECTURE:

[MOUNTAIN TOP LECTURE](#): Freeing Jesus with Diana Butler Bass

A recorded lecture (45 minutes) from an April 10 event followed by a directed conversation and substantial question and answer period. The whole video is two hours, but (of course) you can listen in part or to the entire thing. View [here](#) on YouTube.

Type your email...	Subscribe
--------------------	-----------

Thanks to everyone who joined last Friday's Open House conversation. It was a bit challenging getting used to the threading — but it wound up being fun with lots of back and forth! Y'all kept me on my toes! We'll do it again. Keep your eyes open for when the next Open House invitation comes in your email.

Also, there will be new content in upcoming weeks. I'm going to interview a couple of author-friends about their books. And I'm going to try out Substack's audio feature when I'm brave enough (and have a bit more time) to do so!

The Cottage is just getting started.

 26  21 

[← Previous](#)

[Next →](#)